

Come On Baby, Light My Fire

By Ltjg. Caleb H. Booher and Ltjg. David M. Sparks

The final hurdle of advanced flight training at NAS Corpus Christi is the infamous review stage. This block of five flights in the TC-12 Huron requires the student to call upon all the skills gained throughout the rigorous five-to-six-month program.

As students with the VT-35 Stingrays, Ltjg. David Sparks and I handled one simulated emergency after another. By the time we made it out of review stage, we also had experienced our fair share of actual emergencies. On one flight, we flew instrument approaches using oxygen masks, with failed heading indicators and with a simulated engine failure.

The pinnacle of the program is the solo flight after review stage. This flight is the first time two students sign for an aircraft and take it out of the local area without an instructor aboard. Going into our solo, Sparks and I had no doubt we were prepared for anything the day could conjure up. The simulated emergencies were done, and we had five hours of unmolested, relaxing flight time ahead of us.

Hang around the aviation community long enough and you will find that destinations are not picked by efficiency or utility, but by good food. Chennault International Airport in Lake Charles, La., has a reputation for fine Cajun cuisine, and as we took to runway 31L at Navy Corpus, we already could taste it.

The weather was perfect that Friday. The August skies over Corpus Christi were clear, and the only bad weather on the radar was miles south of our route. We took off and began our climb to 25,000 feet. We kept busy with routine checklists and the standard, mindless pilot babble.

At the very moment we leveled off, a red light at eye level began to flash. It was our “MASTER WARNING” light and was accompanied by the red “FIRE R ENG” light. The fire light flickered twice and then stayed on.

The very first thing that came out of my mouth was, “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Sparks looked out the right window and scanned the engine nacelle for any signs of an actual fire. We watched the engine-temperature indicator for a spike... nothing happened... no fire.

However, our squadron’s standard-operating procedures (SOPs) require that any fire light be honored, even if this meant sacrificing fine Cajun food. So, muttering quiet curses, we shut down the right engine and searched the chart for a suitable place to land. One look at the chart told us that suitability would have to give way to proximity. Palacios, an airfield with three marginally suitable 5,000-foot runways, was just five miles northeast of us. Sparks radioed Stingray base and notified our CDO of the emergency.

Normally, the pilot flying would hand off communications to the copilot, but Sparks had enough on his plate talking to the CDO and other instructors on base frequency. So, I called Houston Center, declared an emergency, and requested an immediate descent and radar vectors to Palacios airfield, which was below us.

By the time we began our descent to 4,000 feet, Palacios was just south of us, and we made a turn toward the field. Passing 10,000 feet, we turned south and looked at the horizon. The bad weather





that had been miles south of our route now had moved over Palacios.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I again said.

As we descended, doing 360-degree doughnuts in the sky to avoid the weather, the clouds just kept getting darker and thicker. Surprisingly, we maintained VMC by lowering the flaps and airspeed to increase our rate of descent, and we weaved through the few holes we could find. After a few bumps from turbulence and some rain on the windscreen, we broke out of the weather at 5,000 feet.

Immediately, I requested vectors for the VOR runway 13. Houston replied that VOR 13 was not depicted on their radar. Sparks and I exchanged a slow "it figures" glance. After one final "You've got to be kidding me," I requested and executed the full-procedure turn for runway 13. We had plenty of altitude to lose. Once the radios quieted down, we completed the remainder of our checklists and set up on final for the runway. For simulated single-engine full stops, the squadron requires 5,900 feet of runway, but 5,000 feet was better than Farmer John's field, and this certainly was not simulated. We came down over the numbers and did everything we had been taught and graded on for six months. Our

training worked: We came to a full stop within 2,600 feet, taxied off the runway, and shut down the remaining engine.

The Palacios Volunteer Fire Department was there to meet us. Sparks called Houston Center and Stingray Base and let them know we were safe on deck. Palacios is an unmanned field, and once the fire department made sure there was no fire or other hazard, they left, and the airfield was empty. The squadron sent a rescue bird to pick us up and return us to Navy Corpus.

Our adventure was a big deal around the squadron for the next week or so; two guys had an actual emergency on their solo flight and safely landed. Obviously, Sparks and I have discussed the incident at length. We understand the excitement and the attention, but there is one point we hope does not get overlooked: There are many instructors at VT-35 who never have performed an actual single-engine landing in the TC-12B, and most never will. But, they taught us how to do it, and it worked. Moreover, Sparks and I are not the only students at VT-35 that could have handled the emergency. Every student who makes it through advanced training has the ability to do what we did that day. 🦅

Ltjgs. Booher and Sparks flew with VT-35.